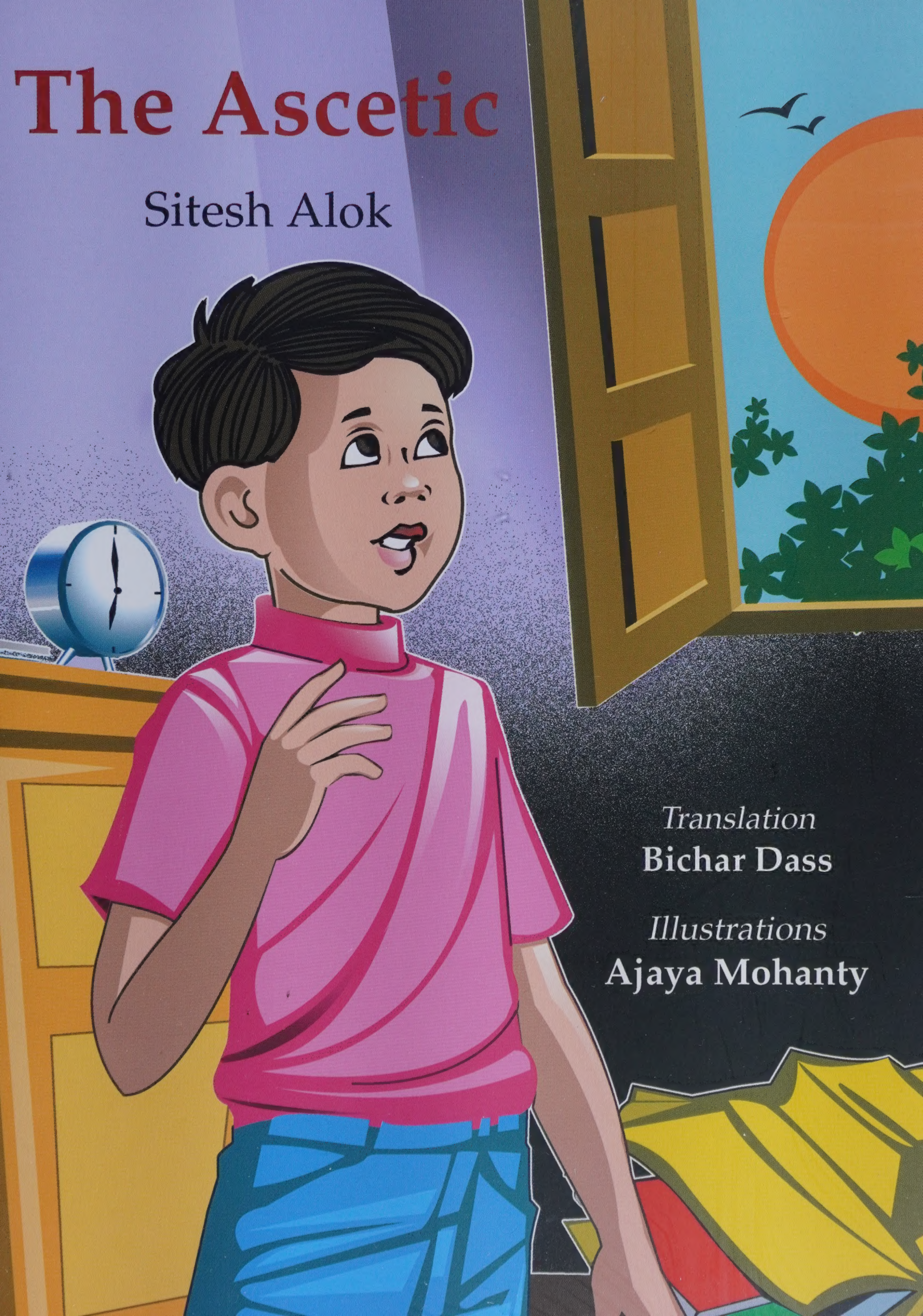
The Ascetic

Sitesh Alok



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Rohit was very fond of stories. His grandfather was so good at telling stories that Rohit would go to him everyday and say entreatingly, "Well Grandpa! Which story will you tell me today?"

Leaving all other work aside his grandfather would narrate a story to Rohit, who would seldom sleep without listening to one.

The stories he told often referred to sages and ascetics undertaking *tapasya** and then receiving boons from God.

Rohit got an impression that God Almighty gets pleased by *tapasya* and people who undertake *tapasya* get their cherished boons from Him. He knew that he was weak in mathematics. He used to score very good marks in all other subjects, but just because of low marks in mathematics, he fell far behind many others in his class. Even while attending the mathematics class, he always feared that his teacher would ask him some question and he would not be able to give the correct answer. That would make him a laughing stock in front of his classmates.

Suddenly one day an idea struck his mind, that if he takes up *tapasya* for a few days, God will be pleased and grant him the boon of wisdom to understand mathematics. Thus, he would get good marks in mathematics too, and top the class. Ruminating over all this he fell asleep.

The moment he woke up in the morning, Rohit again thought about *tapasya*. At the same time, he felt that it was not as easy as he had thought. For *tapasya*, he imagined, he would have to go to

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*Ascetic Austerity

some dense forest and live there without food and water. He had seen pictures of many sages and saints performing *tapasya*. Besides, he did not know where he would find a suitable dense forest. He had seen only a few small and big cities. Nevertheless, he thought that it was not right for him to retreat. If he has to learn mathematics and secure first position in the class, he had no option but to take up *tapasya*.

Suddenly, he heard his mother calling him, "Rohit! Get ready. Are you not going to school? It is getting late."

His mother was surprised to see him casually dressed and holding a mat under his arm. She asked him, "What is all this?"

He was prepared for the reply, "I am going out for *tapasya*."

"What *tapasya*?" His mother wondered. "What is all this madness?"

"This is not madness mother...." Rohit wanted to make his mother understand. "I have to seek boon from God for learning mathematics."

"Alright, you may go in for *tapasya* some other time. First of all, put on your school uniform, eat your breakfast and go to school," his mother said laughing.

Rohit found his mother's behaviour quite strange. He had thought that she would tell him the location of some forest or even escort him there on a rickshaw. Now from whom would he ask about the location of the forest?

Instead of going to his own room, he decided to go to his grandfather, who had just finished his morning prayer. Rohit asked him, "Grandpa! Where is the forest?"

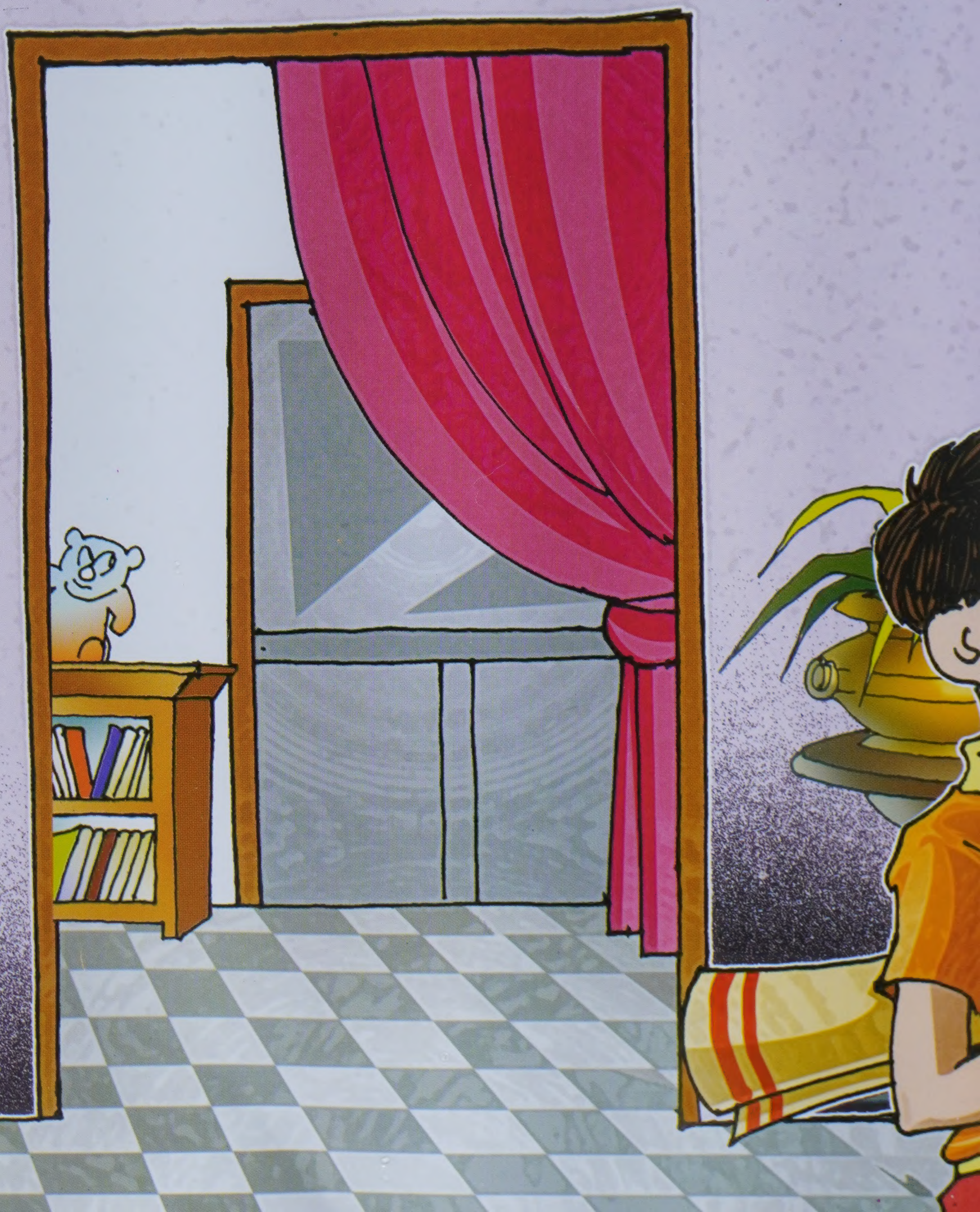
"Forest?" Grandpa felt surprised, "Oh my child! What made you think of forest so early in the morning?"

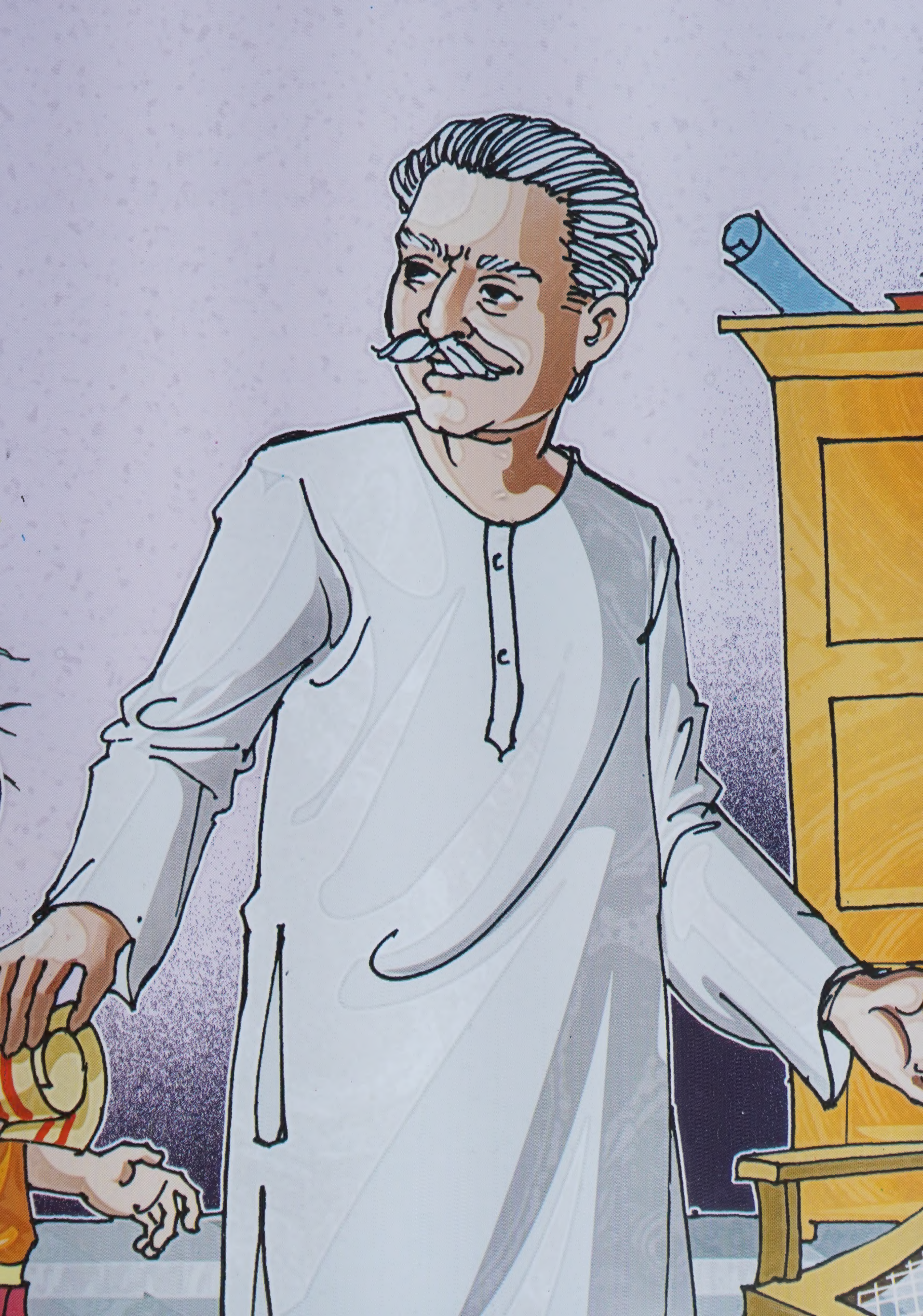
"I have to go to the forest to undertake *tapasya*," Rohit explained in a straight-forward manner.

"Oh my God...!" Grandpa said smilingly. "*Tapasya* is no doubt

a wonderful idea, everybody should undertake *tapasya*. But my dear, what is the need of going to a forest for that?"

Listening to his grandfather, Rohit initially got some hope, but then his subsequent question confused him. He asked, "If I do not





go to the forest, where will I carry out my *tapasya*? Forest is the place for ascetics, isn't it?"

"Maybe true," said his grandfather. "But not for every type of *tapasya*."

"You mean some kinds of *tapasya* are possible at home itself?" Surprised, Rohit asked.

"Yes, of course. Why not at home itself?" said Grandpa emphasising each word he spoke. "There are certain types of *tapasyas*, which can only be carried out at home, and not anywhere else."

"Which *tapasya* can be performed at home, Grandpa?" Rohit asked as if his grandfather was talking childishly.

"Come on...first of all come here, my child." Grandfather lovingly called Rohit to sit close to him and taking the mat from him placed it aside. Then he said, "Well, have you seen your mother? She works throughout the day. Sometimes she takes care of your clothes, sometimes she sweeps and cleans the house, at times she teaches you and at times she serves food to me and gives me my medicines.... Have you ever thought why is she doing all this?"

Rohit wanted to change the subject. He felt that he should ask – 'We were talking about *tapasya*... where does the question of mother's work come in between?' However, he thought that he would first answer the question raised by Grandpa and said, "But, this is her work."

"Yes..." said grandfather getting excited like a child. "But son, all people do not do their work sincerely. Some people do their work very slowly, some people do not do their work whole-heartedly, they keep forgetting one thing or the other, and sometimes they make things worse. And there are some people who do not do their work happily... they do it unwillingly."

"They are bad people," Rohit intervened.

"Oh yes, you can call them bad... or call them irresponsible, but what they do is not good. They make their work messy. They neither get any fruitful result nor any credit for the work they do."

Rohit was getting confused by Grandpa's longish explanations. Then he realised that the question of his going to the forest for undertaking *tapasya* was getting side-tracked in sundries. He said, "Grandpa, all this is fine... but you were talking about the *tapasya* at home."

Grandpa laughed and said, "Yes my child, this is what I am talking about. Alright, now you tell me that whatever your mother does, can it be done in the forest?"

"How will it be possible in the forest? When we are here, then our meals will have to be prepared here. To whom will mother serve food in the forest? And how will she clean the house here if she lives in the forest?"

"This is exactly what I was saying," Grandpa said with a jubilant smile. "Some work can only be done at home."

"But we were talking about *tapasya*. From where has the question of work come up?" Rohit argued.

"Where is the problem, my child?" Grandpa said surprised, "Work alone is our *tapasya*. The entire work, which your mother carries out with dedication and diligence, is her *tapasya*."

Rohit got puzzled and said, "Oh, Grandpa! Work is work, how can you call it *tapasya*."

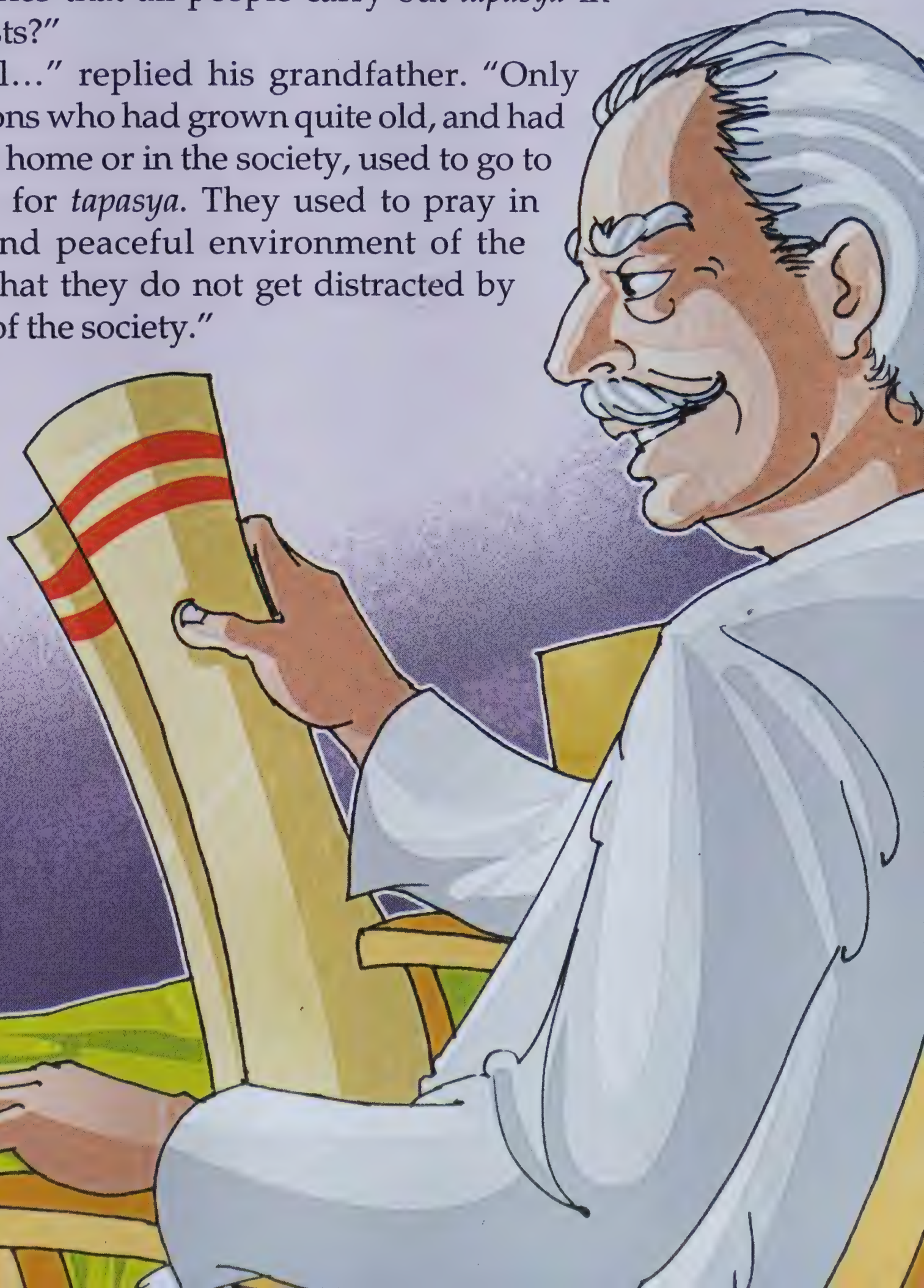
Grandpa explained, "No my dear, they are not different."

"All people work. You mean they all become *tapasvi*... that is ascetics?" Rohit asked.

Grandpa thought for a while and then explained, "Not all, but all those who do their work whole-heartedly, with honesty, diligence and dedication, are nothing short of ascetics."

Rohit felt somewhat satisfied with his grandfather's reply. But still some doubt lingered somewhere in his mind. "Then why is it said in stories that all people carry out *tapasya* in dense forests?"

"Not all..." replied his grandfather. "Only those persons who had grown quite old, and had no work at home or in the society, used to go to the forests for *tapasya*. They used to pray in solitude and peaceful environment of the forest, so that they do not get distracted by the melee of the society."



Rohit again expressed his doubt, "But persons doing work do not give up food and drink. On the other hand, it is shown in the pictures that ascetics who undertook *tapasya* were reduced to skeletons... and grew long unkempt hair...."

"All such illustrations are symbolic, in fact, meant for the uneducated people...." Grandpa said, "It is, nevertheless, true that when a person works with his full concentration, he tends to forget about eating, sleeping and personal comforts.... He eats whatever food he gets, and he does not care much about his clothes, hair-

style, etc. He wears whatever clothes he gets. But this does not mean that *tapasya* is accomplished only by foregoing food." Explaining further, he said, "In fact, in ancient times the advice to carry out '*tapasya* in forests' was given in order to make people understand the desirability of ignoring sundries, which distract their mind, and pay minimal attention to comforts and luxuries of life to pray to God. However, the meaning of words changes with the passage of time. Today, the meaning of *tapasya* is just to perform one's duty with honesty and utmost sincerity."

Rohit understood the essence of his grandfather's explanation, but he was still worried about his mathematics. So, he asked, "Grandpa, then what would happen to my *tapasya*? Will I never be able to learn mathematics?"

"Why not?" Grandpa said in an emphatic tone. "If you undertake *tapasya*, then nothing can stop you from mastering mathematics."

"Grandpa..." Rohit was again getting confused. "You don't allow me to go to a forest and still ask me to undertake *tapasya*... How will it be possible?"

"Remember what I just told you?" Grandpa's eyes began glittering. "Whoever does his work whole-heartedly, with full honesty and all his diligence, is a true ascetic. Didn't I say so?"

"Then..." asked Rohit, trying to understand.

"So you work hard with full concentration of your mind and with full confidence. Do not allow your mind to get distracted by tasty food-items, fashion trends or entertaining pleasures. Try to solve every question four or even five times by

understanding it thoroughly. Devote some time to mathematics regularly. Thereafter, you will yourself see how you master mathematics. Tell me, have you guts to take up this challenge?"

Rohit looked satisfied. He thought what his grandfather had just said was absolutely correct... and not at all impossible. He made up his mind and stood up.

"Alright Grandpa! I am going for my *tapasya*," he said.

"Well, this sounds wonderful..." said Grandpa, as if to tease him, "But tell me, which forest you are going to? And here, take your mat along." He handed over the mat to Rohit.

Rohit understood the joke. He stood up and, as if delivering a dialogue, said, "My dear Grandpa says that for true *tapasya*, forest is not at all a necessity, nor do ascetics need any customary mat to sit on...."

Grandpa enjoyed Rohit's theatrical response. He stood up and pulling him in his arms said, "So my child has understood the real meaning of *tapasya*. Now let us see, who can stop you from getting your desired boon from God."

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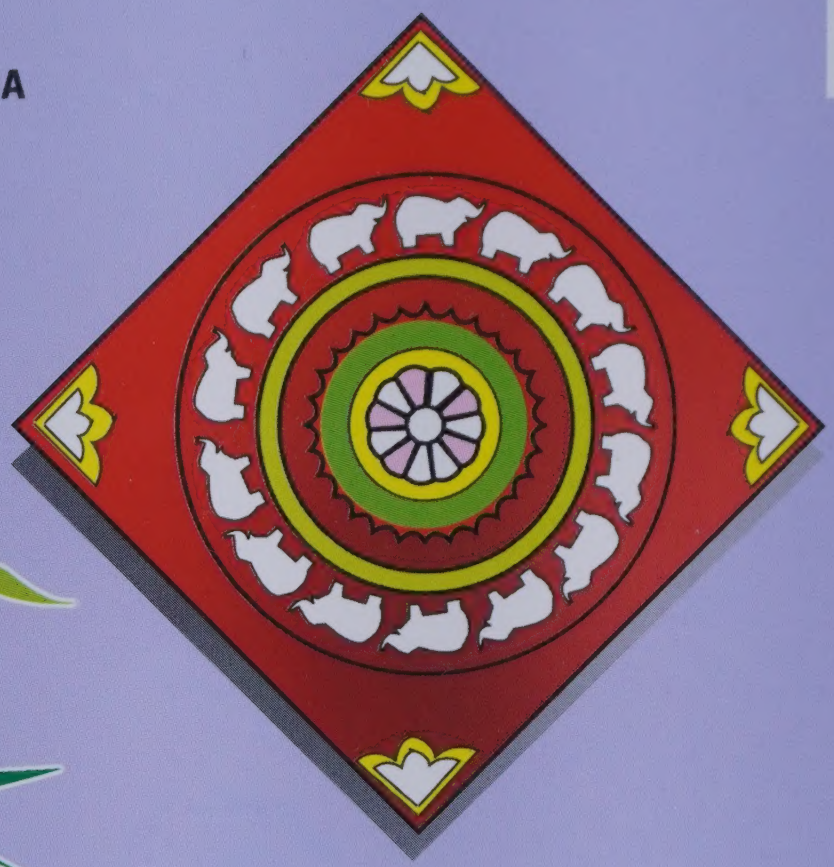
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